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THE MAKING OF MATTHIAS



J. S. FLETCHER:

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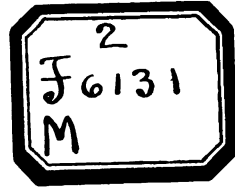
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TO

THE HONOURABLE

MRS. ARTHUR HENNIKER

from 1001 ... 12 June 1906



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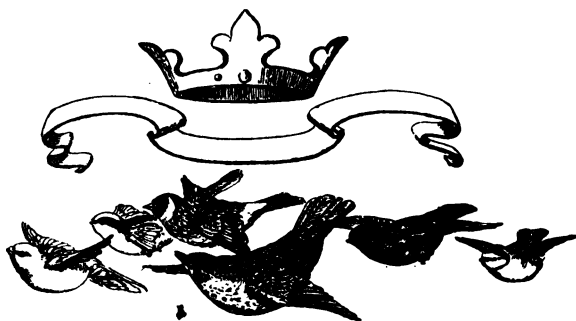
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*The child is father of the man,
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

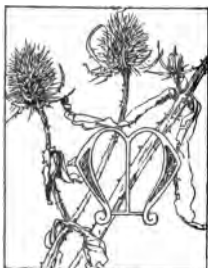
WORDSWORTH.



The Making of Matthias

CHAPTER I

Matthias the King



ATTHIAS lived in the midst of a wide stretch of woods and meadows, and had scarcely any companionship save that of the birds and beasts that dwelt about the old farmstead. His father and mother were dead, and his grandmother was old, and everybody in the

farmstead was grown up, and seemed quite old to him. There was nothing young there except the calves and chickens and ducklings and foals who came every spring, and even they seemed to grow up to manhood or womanhood with astonishing rapidity. One day the chicken was a little fluffy mass of feathers, just tumbled out of the cracked egg-shell; the next it was a stately young lady, with no small idea of its own importance. As for the calves and foals, they turned into cows and horses much more rapidly than the boy grew towards manhood. For a while the foals were all legs; then they sobered down and began to think of things, and presently the horse-breaker came and transformed them into steady-going old horses.

It was because he had no other children to play with or to talk to that this boy made himself the king of all the birds and beasts and insects that lived in the fields

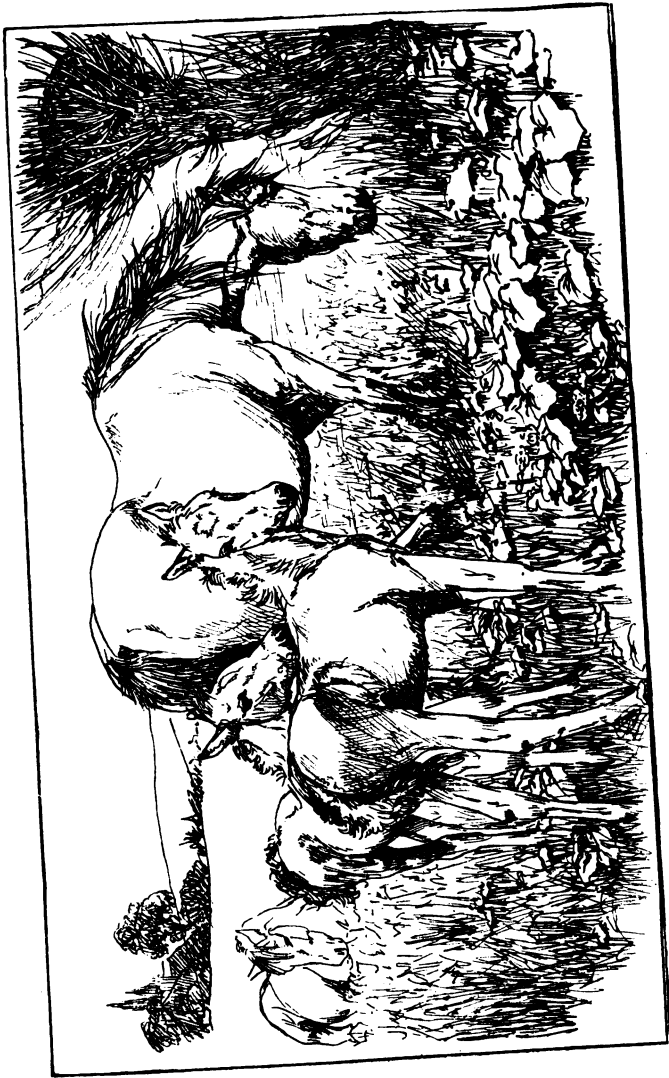




and woods which shut in the farmstead from the outer world. It was ancient Timothy, lord of the sheep and lambs, who first introduced him to his subjects. Timothy, going afield in the sweet spring mornings, and in the bright summer afternoons, carried the boy with him, and showed him many a secret which he himself had only learned by much communing with Nature. He taught him how to imitate the thrush and the blackbird; how to fashion whistles from ash-twigs; how to tell when the rain was coming; and how to foretell a fine morning. He showed him where the violets love best to grow, and where the early primrose first peeps in the woods, and it was he who made Matthias acquainted with the haunts of the blackberry and the home of the crab-apple. All that honest Timothy had learned during his five and sixty years of out-door life he taught to the boy, and thus it was that he, at ten years old, knew more of woodcraft and of the mighty

mother's secrets than other lads know of tops and marbles at the same age.

To live a free life amongst the woods and fields is indeed to be a king, and there are no monarchs, absolute or limited, so free and untrammelled as Matthias was in his kingship. Over the Home Meadow and the wide Twenty-acre, over the Duke's Garth and the Well Close, across the Quarry Wood and the Black Coppice, along the lanes and by-ways, he held undisputed sway, with none to question him. The birds knew him, and sang blithely whenever he came their way; the rabbits on the sand-hills had no fear of him, and carried on their antics and gambols while he sat by and laughed at them; even the fox, meeting him in the by-paths of some dark wood, trotted by him slowly, instead of slinking away through the undergrowth. All these things, the children of Nature, recognised him as one of themselves. He had learnt their language and understood their moods. When March came, and the





missel-thrush sang from the topmost spray of the hawthorn, Matthias knew what he said, and joined him in a song of gratitude for the bright sunshine and the breezy morning. The blackbird, singing lustily in the holly-hedge, because spring and love had come again; the thrush, executing marvellous trills and shakes, because of his five blue eggs in the nest, over which his shy mate brooded; the linnet, piping his loudest in the beech—all these knew that the boy heard and understood them.

Between the children of Nature there is a freemasonry which is never misunderstood by those who share its secrets. The young colts who ran loose in the paddock, and were impatient of interference from any adult being, were quiet and subdued when the boy found his way to them. Their liquid eyes, full of fire as they dashed here and there about the meadows, grew soft and melting as he spoke to them and stroked their shaggy sides. The old billy-goat in the yard, who resented the approach

of all and sundry, and had once butted John the ploughman clean over the wall of the fold, recognised Matthias's supremacy so thoroughly as to allow his beard to be pulled and his curving horns to be played with. The fierce bull, kept for safety within a stout barricade of logs in the corner of the fold, put his ringed muzzle through the chinks and let the boy scratch his broad nose. Every cow in the mistal, every bullock and heifer in the fold, knew him and greeted his approach with sympathetic mooing. Thus his wandering about the farm was a royal progress, and amongst all his subjects there were none that refused him allegiance.

Of all parts of his kingdom there were none so dear to this monarch as the Quarry Wood. In summer, when the afternoons were long and bright, and a gentle breeze toned down the fierce advances of the sun, he used to make for the wood and sit there for hours surrounded by such of his subjects as lived in these regions. On the edge of



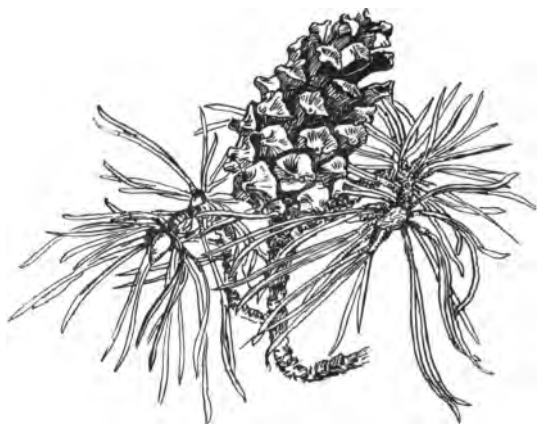


the old quarry, long fallen into disuse, and now almost hidden by a miscellaneous growth of dwarf trees and shrubs, there lay the giant bulk of a mighty oak, uprooted by some fierce storm in some long past year. This was the King's throne, and there he sat, a cluster of honeysuckle his crown, a long bough of ash or elm his sceptre, a tussock of green moss his footstool. All round him flocked his subjects. The owl was Prime Minister, and sat blinking wisely in a deep hole in the withered elm. The jay, the raven, the magpie were counsellors, and the linnet was poet laureate. Sometimes the whole body of courtiers talked all at once; and as for the sparrows, who represented the Commons, they were irrepresible, and had always some petition to present. Overhead the stockdoves and wood-pigeons uttered their soft love-notes, and now and then the restless cuckoo, flitting across the wood, rested for a brief moment above the royal seat and saluted his Majesty with respect before he passed

onward. The myriad insects, things that are born and live and die within the compass of a summer's day, kept up a continual humming, while the birds sang their various ditties, and so this regal court was entertained with music until the sun went down and the land went dreamily to sleep. But then came the finest music of all, for as the moon rose, climbing ghostlike across the dark edge of the woods, the nightingale, hid in some deep coppice, began its song, and the land woke again and listened and feasted its soul with melody. And so the night came, and the stars and the winds hushed the King and all his subjects to dreamless sleep.

Such was the life of this king of nature and her children. Whether in summer or winter, autumn or spring, he was happy and content ; although he was out of the world and had never seen a circus or a pantomime. He was learning the best things, the only things that are true and lasting, and out of his mind those lessons did not

pass. In after years he did not forget the things that had been whispered to him in his lonely kingdom amongst the broad acres and deep forests. For that loneliness he was all the better and richer and wiser. No man goes into the desert for forty days without coming away refreshed and stronger, and no man knows the secrets of life, and, perchance, of eternity, until he has sought them of the things that live and change and live again while man passes and is gone. It is well to acquire knowledge of arts and sciences, and to see men and cities ; but our standards of true wisdom are arbitrary, and it may well be that this king of birds and beasts knew more that is real than many a world-famed philosopher.





CHAPTER II

The Farmstead



UT of the long winding village street there turned at sharp angles a lane, narrow and rutty, dry and baked in summer, and wet and muddy in winter, which led first to the Manor Farm and afterwards to nowhere in particular. There were fields and closes away beyond the Manor Farm which might be approached by this

lane, but as there were two good roads also leading to them, it seemed useless to make for them by following this obviously inconvenient route. Those who rode in carts up this lane found themselves well-nigh shaken to death ere they came in sight of the Manor Farm gates. The ruts were so deep, the holes so many, the sudden falls and rises were so startling, and had such effects on the body of him who sat in a springless cart, that it was preferable to walk. Walking was pleasant in summer, when the lane was dry, but in winter it meant many things and much mud.

This lane, however, had its delights and beauties. Starting straight out of the village street it passed the little close in which Farmer Peckfold kept his young calves in summer and certain weakly stock in winter, and wound under the shadow of the high orchard wall, behind which the parson's apples sunned themselves in September. Then it lay between the school-

yard on the left hand and the churchyard on the right, and when it had passed these haunts of quiet peace it came to the red-tiled tithe barn and the parson's pigeon-cote, round the grey roof of which flew innumerable white birds. Thence it wound about between the crofts that lay behind the village.

It was very narrow ; nowhere in all its length was there room for two carts to pass each other, nor for a pedestrian to pass a cart. The man who walked on foot meeting the man who rode in a cart retired up the bank and squeezed himself into the hedgerow until such times as the cart had rumbled by. Sometimes it came about that while this was afoot the cart wheel would fall into a deep hole in the rut and rest there, in which case the man in the hedge had to remain fixed to the hollies and hawthorns until the cart had been extricated and moved forward, leaving him room to go on his way.

At the end of all these ruts, facing the

lane and looking down it towards the village, stood the Manor Farm. Admission to it was gained by a wide gate, usually painted light blue, in deference to the prevailing political colour of that particular corner of the world. Once inside that gate the explorer found himself in the farm-fold. On his right hand stood the barn, old, grey, rather ruinous; on his left were the cow-houses, pig-cotes, and the open shed for fat cattle; before him rose the granary and the stables. Through another gate he gained admittance to the wide stretch of cobble-stones which formed an approach to the kitchen door of the farmhouse. From the edge of this pavement stretched a long green close, known as the Home Garth, and there the fowls, turkeys, ducks, and geese strayed wherever they would, not infrequently escorted by the pigs, who got out of the fold in order to root and snuffle among the green grass and the brown earth. Along one side of the Garth there stretched a row of tall walnut-trees,

and under these in autumn the farm-lads sat expectant, praying that the next puff of wind might blow down a ripened nut or two.

But if the man who came to the Manor Farm deemed it necessary to his dignity to enter its precincts by the front door, he was obliged to go round by another way. At the head of the narrow lane ran another lane, wider but almost wilder, and the farmstead was across this, and ran with it for a hundred yards or so. To enter it by the front way, then, it was necessary to follow the lane for a few yards until, at the end of the farm buildings, you came to an orchard, surely the sweetest and most delightful spot that ever was carpeted with light grass and pink-tipped daisies. A little gate that never looked new, though in the course of two centuries it must needs have been replaced more than once, gave access to this orchard. Once within it the visitor found himself in the shade of all manner of fruit-trees, so

thickly planted together that in September it was impossible to see the sky for plums, pears, apples, and cherries. In May there was no sky to be seen, either ; for the blossom, white and pink, blotted it all out. In August, when the bees and wasps had detected the first bit of ripeness in the fruit, there was a perpetual humming and buzzing in the orchard, and you had only to stretch yourself under the trees and close your eyes in order to be soothed imperceptibly to sleep.

Now the front of the farmhouse stood revealed. A quaint, low-roofed structure of red-brick, built in nobody's fashion, without pretence at adornment, with small windows, filled with little square panes of glass, secured by lead casements, and with the grass of the orchard growing right to the walls. The door was low ; an ordinary-sized man would stoop to enter it. The roof was tiled, but here and there house-leek had grown at the foot of the chimneys and spread over the tiles, and in one corner

of the gable an ivy plant had taken root and climbed upwards, with the result of a contrast in green and red. At the corner of the house was a wicket-gate giving admittance to the Garth. Away in front, seen through the straight trunks of the more recently planted fruit-trees, there were glimpses of the land that lies flat and level in the eastern quarter of Osgold-cross, stretching away over Snaith and the Ouse until the hills begin to rise beyond Howdenshire.

Within the house all was quaint and old, and somewhat dark. The parlour, rarely used save on Sundays and festivals, was lower than the ground outside by a good foot, and therefore it was damp. Now and then, in or after a rainy season, the walls ran water, and whoever had the daring to sit there, suffered afterwards from ague and rheumatism and cold. But in the big kitchen, which was always used as a living-room, things were different. Its stone floor was dry, save when Betty deluged

it with water and polished it with buttermilk. The great fireplace always glowed with warmth ; the old chairs were inviting and comfortable, and the angle of the barn outside kept away all winds that otherwise had entered the door. Moreover, in the kitchen hung matters which gave it a homelike appearance. From the rafters depended flitches of bacon, side by side with hams done up in sheeting, and between them were paper bags, containing dried herbs, sage, thyme, and savoury marjoram. There, too, stood the quaint old clock, tall and spectral, ghostlike if you will, but in a friendly and reassuring fashion, and beside it hung the great brass warming-pan, without which no house was complete in those days, and over the mantelshelf, above the brass candlesticks and china dogs, hung the cavalryman's sword which was Matthias's most cherished possession.

To Matthias the Manor Farm was a place of witchery. Every nook and corner

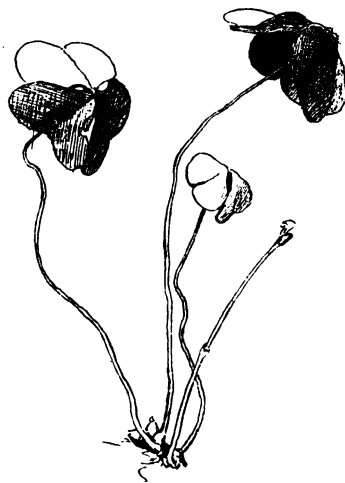




of it was familiar to him. He knew all the hiding-places in barn and granary. When he went to hunt in the eggs he knew where the speckled hen loved to lay, and where the ducks were accustomed to hide their eggs in the orchard hedge. In the spring mornings he rose early and went out through the dewy grass, caring nothing for wet feet, for was there not a thrush building under the walnut-trees in the Garth, and a linnet in the elm-bush in the orchard corner? In summer he lay under the plum-trees, face propped by hands, and watched the curious insects that live in the grass; or read, with wide eyes, in some of the old books that he found in the garret. But in autumn, when all the silent land was brown and bare, and the silver moon shone phantomlike across the cropped fields, the boy stood at night and drank in the witchery and the magic of the land as daisies drink in dew. To him the silence was full of mighty voices, the hedgerows and trees were thick with mystic shapes,

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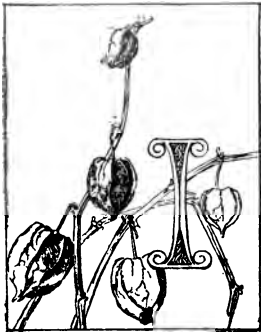
the sky, the stars, the fleeting clouds that flitted across the moon's face, had meanings and messages. Under their influence he lost himself, and was absorbed in Nature.





CHAPTER III

The Man who went Home



It was a clear, starlighted, frosty night in mid-December, and all round the Manor Farm the land lay hushed and silent as if it knew that Christmas was coming. The stars burnt like watchfires: the milky way was one long, wide highroad of white light. The gables and

roofs of the barns and granaries, and the squat chimney-stacks of the house made black blots against the blue of the sky. That was dark enough, but something made it clear. It stretched over the crofts and closes, the quiet meadows and the sleeping village like a great canopy. Awful it was to look at, and yet it suggested good thoughts.

Matthias and Timothy stood outside the kitchen door, star-gazing. The boy's eyes were full of wonder. They stared, and stared, and stared again at the high vaults of infinite space. Matthias wondered. His whole life was so full of wonder that all things seemed wonderful. He was now lost amidst the stars. What were they? Were there people in them? Would he ever go there? And what was behind them in that dark blue void? And why, on such a night as this, was the land wrapped in such silence? It seemed as if the whole earth stood still and waited for something to happen.





Timothy smoked his short clay pipe. He was not troubled by these thoughts. Five and sixty years of life amongst the brown acres had taught him to think of what lay close at hand. He was content. The cattle had been foddered, the pigs fed, the hens were all roosting, and he had had his supper. For that day, at any rate, there was no more to be done.

Matthias, drawing a long breath of wonder, shifted his eyes from the stars to a faint chink of ruddy light that glowed in the darkness across the fold. Another thought seized him.

"Timothy," said he, "let's go see Peter."

Timothy nodded his head, stuck his horny forefinger into the bowl of his pipe, so that the burning ashes might not fall out upon the straw, and stumped away with Matthias at his heels. They crossed the fold and climbed the six stone steps that led to Peter's door.

Peter had dwelt in a small room over

the stable for nine years. He was an Irishman from Connemara. When he first came to the Manor Farm it was as a casual harvest hand, but when the harvest month was over he stayed on for the winter, and eventually he became a fixture. The little room above the stable, originally designed for a saddleroom, was given over to him. It already had a fireplace, and this, with a table, a chair, and a bed, made it comfortable. Matthias and Timothy often found their way there at night, and sat by Peter's fire talking. Sometimes Timothy fetched hot potatoes from the potato-boiling-house across the fold, and they ate them with salt, and found them better than those served in the ordinary way.

Peter sat by his fire. He had a short pipe, black as jet, in his mouth, and, as he sucked at it, he stared at the red flames. He faced round when the old man and the boy entered, and rose from his seat. It was the rule that when Matthias and

Timothy visited him the boy should have the chair and Timothy the bed to sit upon, while Peter himself sat on the floor with his back to the chimney-piece.

The three sat down, the men smoking and the boy staring with his deep black eyes at the leaping flames. It was some minutes before either spoke. Then the Irishman took his pipe from his lips and spat into the ashes, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked at Matthias and at Timothy.

“Masther Matthias and Timothy,” said Peter, “there’s news for the two on ye. I was thinkin’ hard when ye come in by the dure just now, and, bedad, I’ll tell ye of what it was that I thought. Matthias dear, and Timothy, me ould friend, I’ll be going home.”

Matthias stared. It was difficult to think of the Manor Farm without Peter. He was as much a part of it as the old pony, or the sheep-dog, or Timothy himself.

"What, back to Ireland!" he said.

"Shure, young masher, and where else would home be? Nine long years have I been in this country, and ivery wan of thim undher this roof, and sorry will I be to leave it. But I'm called, Masher Matthias, I'm called, and this week-end I'll be going, and then I'll spend the blessed Christmas wid my own people."

Timothy nodded.

"'Tis a longish journey to them parts," said he.

"Faith, and so 'tis."

"Ye'll come back?" asked Timothy.

Peter shook his head.

"Well, thin, maybe I will some day, just to take a look at ye. For a while I'll be stoppin' wid my own folks. For, ye see, I'm going to be married."

"Ah!" said Timothy, "no doubt."

"Ye see, Matthias dear, 'twas in this way that I come to this country. There was a young girl in the place I lived in beyant there; shure, it'll do ye no harm

to know her name, and that's Eileen Neil, the prettiest colleen that iver ye set eyes on, wid cheeks like the May-blossom when it's pink and white, and eyes as black as sloes. And her and me, well, bedad, we loved aich other from the time we was little youngsters. And thin at last I up and axed ould Terence Neil, that was her father, to give her to me. 'And that was likely,' says he, 'when you've nothing to marry on,' he says. For, ye see, Matthias and Timothy, we had a bit o' land, me and my brother Michael, and 'twas poor, at its best, and times were hard, and we were poor, there was no doubtin' it. 'Come wid a hundred pounds in your hand,' says Terence Neil, 'and Eileen shall be yours and fifty pounds wid her.'"

"Ay, ay!" said Timothy. "Ay, of course!"

"So, then," continued Peter, "I said I would do that same or die, and I spoke to Eileen and we swore our troth one to each other, and I gave up the bit of land to

Michael, and I come over to this country to save the money."

"And now?" said Matthias.

"Bedad, I've saved it," said Peter. "One hundred golden sovereigns, out o' nine years' worruk. And all that long time I didn't see ould Ireland nor Eileen wance, but now I'm going home, and, plase God, I'll see 'um both wance more."

"Ay," said Timothy, "ay."

"'Tis a long time, nine years," said Peter reflectively, "and I'll be finding many changes. But ivery now and then Eileen has written me a letter—shure, ain't they all sewed up in me best weskit?—and she'd be afther tellin' me the news. Shure, I can't read mesilf, but your grandmother, Matthias dear, reads 'em to me, and 'tis illigant news. But it'll be better to be home and see 'um all wance more, and to see Eileen that's waited for me these nine long years."

Next morning the post-girl came toiling





up the crooked lane and met Matthias at the gate of the fold.

“A letter for Peter,” said she, and placed it in his hand. “It’s from Ireland,” she added.

Peter was close by. He took the letter from Matthias and turned it over. Then he looked at it in a dazed fashion, and set off towards the kitchen, with the boy close at his heels.

The mistress stood within the kitchen preparing the breakfast. She looked up as Peter entered.

“Mistress dear, ’tis a letter, and ye’ll read it to me at wanst! Shure, ’tis no scholar that I am; but that’s not Eileen’s handwriting, mistress. What is it?”

Matthias watched his grandmother open the folded sheet. It seemed to him that she was very slow. He looked from her to Peter, and he saw a change come over the old woman’s face and communicate itself to the man’s anxious eyes. She looked up at the Irishman, and then again

at the letter, and Matthias knew that sorrow had come.

“Mistress!” Peter was speaking in a hard, low voice. “There’s trouble, mistress. Tell me what it is. Shure, I can’t read it for myself. It’s my poor girl, my pretty Eileen, isn’t it, mistress?”

“Yes, Peter.”

“Mistress, you were iver a good friend to me. Tell me now, at wanst, all that it says. Mistress—is she—is she—dead?”

There was no sunlight that day about the little farmstead. It seemed to Matthias that there would never be sunlight any more. He went and sat with Peter in the barn, and there was a sense of unutterable woe and desolation and sorrow in every chamber of his soul.

“Dead, dead!” said Peter, now and again, “and I’ll never see her any more. And for nine years she waited for me, and I was comin’.”

Peter said no more about going over to Ireland. He stayed where he was, and

went about his work. He had no more jokes nor fairy tales, and at night he sat by his wood fire and stared at the ashes. And one day he got soaked to the skin in the fields, and was too careless to change his clothes, and within a few days the hand of death came upon him.

Matthias and Timothy stood by Peter's bed, the lad full of awe and wonder, for the angel's wings were very near.

"I'll be going home," said Peter.

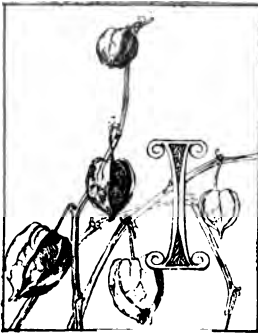
They buried him in the churchyard while the snow fell. Matthias watched the snowflakes fall on the black coffin. He wondered curiously where Peter was; and then a thought came into his head and made him happy. He wondered no longer. Peter had gone home to his sweetheart, and the nine years' separation was at an end.





CHAPTER IV

The Oak Chest



It was a dark, gloomy December morning, and outside the farmstead the snow lay piled against the walls three feet deep. All the previous day and all through the night it had snowed heavily, and when Timothy woke at five o'clock in the morning and looked out of his little

window, the land lay before him in the uncertain light like one vast sheet of whiteness. It was hard work that morning to get about the fold. The snow had drifted heavily against doors and walls, and here and there the farm-men had to plunge into its feathery mass waist-high before they could enter barn or stable. The cattle in the fold had retreated beneath the covered shed, and stood there early in the morning, looking dreamily out upon the white carpet that stretched before them. The mounds of straw which Timothy had piled in the fold at noon the previous day had been covered over during the snowfall, and now looked like mimic mountains of virgin whiteness. The old pump in the corner, carefully happed with straw and sacking against the frost, had disappeared under the snow; and so, too, had other familiar landmarks. Snow lay thick everywhere. The trees in the orchard, the bushes in the garden, were all drowned and lost in its feathery mass. The world during the night had been





changed to fairy whiteness. If the morning had been fine, with a clear sky and a glittering sun, the earth would have dazzled whoever looked upon its unbroken purity of colour. But the morning was dark and lowering; there was more snow in those gloomy clouds, and before noon it would fall. So said Timothy, than whom no one knew the signs of the sky better.

Matthias sat by the kitchen fire, watching his grandmother. It was out of the question for him to go to school. Before he had got out of the farmstead precincts he would have been up to his shoulders in snow; in the narrow lane that led to the village he would have been lost altogether, for there the flakes had drifted until they made a snow-bank the height of the hedges on either side. Therefore he stayed at home, and now sat by the fireside watching his grandmother, who stood at the deal table under the window making pies for the replenishing of the larder.

Matthias was not exactly happy. There

was nothing to do, and to be inactive was distasteful to him. He wished the snow had not come in such overwhelming masses. A light fall would have meant fun and jollity; there would have been snowballing and building of snow-men. Under the present circumstances, nothing was possible—it was no good going out of doors when one had to wade through snow a yard deep at every step. And yet there was nothing to do indoors, and sitting by the fire in idleness was neither pleasant nor interesting.

Matthias yawned. His grandmother looked round, and because of her superior wisdom knew what ailed him. She took a key from the big linen pocket that hung beneath her apron, and laid it on the table.

“Matthias,” said she, “I want some apples. Take the key and the basket, and go up to the apple-chamber and bring half a basketful of apples, and don’t forget to lay the straw over them again.”

Matthias picked up the key and the basket with alacrity. He did not often go up to the apple-chamber, but he was always glad of the chance of doing so, not because of the apples, but rather because the chamber was a place of interest and awe. He now ran up the narrow staircase that led from the kitchen, and turned the big key in the lock with a feeling that this was better than sitting by the fireside in idleness.

The apple-chamber was in darkness. It lay under the eaves of the house, and was lighted by a little pane of glass let into the tiles. Over this the snow lay thick and heavy, and so the chamber was full of gloom. Matthias went down to the kitchen, got a candle, and went back, followed by his grandmother's admonition to be careful not to set fire to the straw. When he got inside the apple-chamber he set the candle down, and looked about him.

The apple-chamber was certainly an interesting place to be in. In one corner stood a collection of old guns, muskets,

and blunderbusses, handed down from one generation to another. Against the walls hung old saddles of antique fashion that had fallen into disuse and been stowed away and forgotten. Quaint odds and ends of all sorts were piled in corners, and the spiders had woven their webs across them. There was a decidedly musty smell about everything, and it was deepened by the sweet, strong odour of the apples and pears that lay carefully spread in straw on the floor.

Matthias set down his basket and turned back the straw, and selected as many apples as made the basket half full. This done, he prepared to depart. But with the basket in one hand and the candle in the other he lingered, and looked round, and his eyes fell on the oak chest.

The oak chest stood in one corner of the apple-chamber. It was a quaintly carved thing of black oak, and in the scrolls and niches the mildew had gathered, for the place was damp. Matthias had seen it

many a time, but he had never found out what it contained. Now he felt a desire to explore its mysteries. There must be something in it. He set down the apple-basket again, and went over the straw-covered floor and lifted the lid, and looked in. A strong and musty smell came to him from the depths of the chest. He held the candle lower and peered into the gloom, and then he saw that the oak chest was full of books.

Matthias pondered. He was then nine years old, and he knew much of the fields and woods, but little of books. His chief reading so far had been in those historical books of Scripture in which there is war and rumour of war. He began to wonder, as he stood by the chest, if there might not be something in there that would interest him. So wondering, he carried the apples down to the kitchen, leaving the apple-chamber open.

“Where’s the key?” said Matthias’s grandmother.

“I haven’t locked the door,” answered Matthias. “There’s an old chest up there, full of books. Can I go up and look at them?”

“Lord bless the lad! They’re old things that were there when I was a bairn,” said Matthias’s grandmother. “Bring down what you want, child—it’s cold up there.”

Matthias cared nothing for the cold. He remounted the stairs to the apple-chamber, and setting down the candle on the chest, proceeded to examine its contents. There were perhaps a hundred old volumes there, thrown in indiscriminately, folios, quartos, octavos, duodecimos, bound in leather or paper boards, musty, worm-eaten, and damp. Matthias’s fingers grew blue with cold as he examined them, but he took no heed. He had suddenly come into a new world, and he took possession of it in sober earnest.

The books were of all sorts. There were sermons, preached by learned and godly gentlemen, and printed in quaint





type somewhere in the seventeenth century ; there were pamphlets and broadsides that would have made some men's mouths water ; there was more than one folio, printed in black letter, and there were strangely illustrated volumes printed in the days when wood-engraving was in its infancy. As to the value of these things Matthias knew nothing. He took them out of the box, looked them over, and threw them on the straw at his side. He was looking for something that seemed good to read.

Eventually Matthias found certain books that immediately appealed to his tastes. The first was a small and clumsy volume, entitled "The Pilgrim's Progress." It was exceedingly musty and worm-eaten, but the pictures were entrancing, especially one in which Master Faithful was being carried to heaven in what appeared to be a washing-tub, drawn by three pigs, and another in which Christian was represented in the act of disembowelling the foul fiend.

Then came the history of one Robinson Crusoe, which seemed likely to contain much amusing matter, judging by a picture, which represented the said Robinson clothed in the grass of the field. Matthias had never heard of either Robinson or Christian until then, but he made up his mind that he would know them both better ere the day was out. He laid them aside in the straw, and looked out for more of their sort. Presently he found a quarto volume, very mouldy and wet, which purported to describe the truly remarkable and wonderful adventures of one Christopher Columbus, who discovered the new world and saw Indians and other strange folk. Beneath this was the history of a gentleman named Peter Wilkins, concerning whom Matthias immediately felt a great curiosity. He put Robinson and Christian, Wilkins and Columbus together, and piling the other books back into the chest, locked the apple-chamber door and ran downstairs to the kitchen.

All that day Matthias sat by the fireside and read. At noon Timothy came into the kitchen with wonderful stories of the great snowstorm. Folks had been buried, and houses too, and Farmer Peckitt's sheep in the Low Garth had been covered over. Matthias heard nothing of this. He sat with his book in front of him, his hands propping his head, his eyes ablaze with wonder and delight. He ate his meals reading, he heard nothing of remark or question. How could he, considering that he was a thousand miles away with Columbus on the unknown sea, or flying through the air with Peter Wilkins? The afternoon came and brought more snow, but Matthias never once went to the window to look at it. He had seen many a snowstorm, but he had never met Masters Christian and Faithful before, nor Man Friday either. All he wanted was to be left alone with these new companions. It was with a sigh of profound regret that he had at last to shut his book and go to bed.

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When he slept it was only to dream of the new world of fancy and imagination that he had found within the musty recesses of the oak chest in the apple-chamber.





CHAPTER V

The Cavalryman's Sword



ATTHIAS went along the village street, joyful and wondering. It was Saturday afternoon, and there was no school. Also, it was autumn, and the mellow sunbeams fell like angel's kisses on the rosy-cheeked apples that still hung unplucked in the orchards on either side the way. In the street itself there were few people to be

seen. Goody Hornbeam sat at her cottage door, knitting. On a chair at her side lay her great Bible, open at some favourite passage. Now she looked at her knitting and then at the open Bible. Over every stitch her wrinkled lips murmured some holy word.

Goody Hornbeam blessed Matthias as he went by. Matthias felt that the blessing did him good, and was fitting to the occasion. The occasion, indeed, was solemn, even sacred, for Matthias was bound on a great and eventful mission. All day long its greatness had weighed upon him. He had risen while yet the fitful morning shadows lay deep on the croft and meadow, and all during the forenoon one thought only had been in his mind: that thought was of his afternoon's errand. Now imagination had got the mastery over him, because of his intense concentration of thought. He was no longer Matthias. The village was no more a picturesque gathering of red-tiled houses and barns ;

the fields were no longer plain areas of stubble or brown soil. All was changed. The cottages and farmsteads were faery buildings in which dwelt ogres, wizards, and sore-distressed damosels; the fields were full of rye and barley, that moved rhythmically to the waving of the wailing wind. As for himself, he was a youthful knight about to receive his first great charge and sacred trust.

Matthias was on his way to fetch home the cavalryman's sword. For three years past the cavalryman had promised that the sword should be his some day. At last the day had come: the sword was to change hands. Matthias was joyful to think of it. It seemed to him that the sword was to symbolise a great change in his life. Henceforth, though he was but ten years old, he was to rank as a man. It is only men that use swords; to be girt with one implies manhood, and more.

The cavalryman's cottage door was ajar when Matthias approached it. He

stood with his hand lifted to knock on its nail-studded panel, but paused, half afraid. His heart leapt in his bosom, because the sword was so near. He could see it in his mind's eye. It hung above the mantelshelf, its old leather scabbard grey and worn. The thought of it nerved him to knock at the door; but when the cavalryman bade him enter, his knees trembled, and for a moment his eyes swam so that he could see nothing.

“Matthias!” The cavalryman half rose from his chair by the fire, and waved his pipe in welcome. “Good lad! ’Tis but three o’clock, and thou art there at the door: good lad again. The Great Duke loved punctuality and attention. Matthias, sit down.”

Matthias sat down near the cavalryman. So full of emotion was he that he did not dare to lift his eyes to the beloved sword. Rather he fixed them on any other object. The old black cat sitting on the hearth; the weather-house over the pantry door;

the brass candlesticks on the dresser; the picture of Waterloo on the wall—all these objects he examined in turn, keeping his eyes away from the true subject of his thoughts. The cavalryman, filling his pipe with black tobacco from his leaden box, watched him and smiled. He read Matthias's face as other men read books.

“ You have come for the sword, Matthias. Well, it is yours. To-night it will hang in your grandmother's cottage instead of in mine. It has hung over the mantelpiece there these two and twenty years. 'Tis now the year of grace eighteen hundred, thirty and seven, and it was last unsheathed in the year 'fifteen—greatest of all years that ever I saw. Never since then has it left its scabbard. But now——”

The cavalryman paused and fidgeted with his clay pipe. The smoke seemed to get into his eyes, for they were watery; and into his throat, for he coughed. After a moment he recovered himself, and, stooping down to the fire, took up a hot coal

with the tongs, and applied it to the tobacco once more.

“Take down the sword, Matthias.”

Matthias rose from his seat. He turned hot and cold, his hands trembled, his breath seemed to come and go in fitful rushes. He looked at the cavalryman, and from him to the sword.

“Yes, Matthias, take it down.”

Matthias clenched his hands and set his teeth together. He felt as if he were about to lay hands on some sacred object. He was a devotee, about to approach the shrine. He pulled a chair in front of the mantelpiece, and climbed up and touched the sword with trembling fingers. All along the upper edge of the worn scabbard lay a thick deposit of fine dust. It fell about the sword and the boy as he stepped down again and turned to the cavalryman.

The cavalryman stood up and took off his cap with an air of obedient reverence. He received the sword from the boy with

a devout behaviour. It was to him what the chalice is to the believer: he worshipped it.

“Ah!”

The cavalryman took the scabbard in his left hand and the hilt of the sword in his right. His fingers, somewhat crooked and stiff, curled lovingly about the familiar grooving, and he sighed deeply. He made as if to draw the sword from its scabbard, then paused, and looked at Matthias.

“Matthias,” said the cavalryman, “I feel that this is a great moment. I am going to look on the blade with which I slew men. Yes, men: not one man, nor two, nor five, nor six, but many men. Great, lusty, valiant men they were, but all of them Frenchmen. I killed them, Matthias, with this sword. They met me in many places. Sometimes it was in Spain, and sometimes in Portugal, but at last it was at Waterloo. Oh, that great day! Never will Englishmen know such another day as that. It was a battle of

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the gods, yea, and of the devils. The smoke and the flame of it rolled up to heaven and spread across the earth. Blood, blood, blood; it was all blood. The skies and the rivers, and the green grass, and the waving fields of golden wheat—blood was on them all. And blood is on the sword.”

Matthias shuddered. It was not from fear—he knew nothing of that. His soul was full of emotion, and its overflowing made his body pulse and vibrate. He gazed at the sheathed sword with dilating eyes.

“Yes, there is blood on the sword. The last stroke that ever I made with it, Matthias, was a mighty stroke. It shore through a man’s neck—swish! there was the stroke, and the head jumped away from the body and went rolling and bounding down the slope, and the headless trunk stood swaying for a moment, swaying this way and that, until it fell as an oak falls to the ground. And that was the last

stroke that ever I made, for we had beaten them."

Matthias stood spellbound. His lips were parted, his eyes were opened to their widest; he leaned forward, panting for breath.

"Now, then, Matthias, I give the sword to thee! Not to be used in battle, Matthias, for God forbid that we should have more wars, but to be kept and treasured in memory of the old cavalryman, thy friend. When thou hast enemies to fight, look at the sword and be strong. When thy time of battle comes, look at the sword and pray to God to give thee the victory. When thine own heart fights against thine own soul, look at the sword and be of good cheer. And now——"

With a sudden sweep of his arm the cavalryman drew the sword from its sheath. A glint of autumn sunlight darting through the window caught it and flashed upon it. As suddenly as he had withdrawn it the cavalryman restored it

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to its scabbard. He held it for a moment, and then placed it tenderly in the boy's arms. Then Matthias went away, and the cavalryman turned once more to the fire, over which the sword no longer hung.





CHAPTER VI

The Slaying of the Giants



ATTHIAS, almost breathless from hard running, burst into the great kitchen and made for the hearth. Timothy sat there eating and drinking, for it was near eight o'clock, and he had fed the pigs and locked the last hen into the hen-roost. At the deal table under the window Matthias's grandmother was

making apple-pasties. Matthias took no heed of either. He pushed past Timothy, reached down the cavalryman's sword, which hung by the oven, and made off by the way he had come.

"Matthias?" The grandmother raised her head and called him. "It was Matthias, wasn't it?"

"Ah!" Timothy swallowed the last spoonful of beer and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Matthias, surely."

"Where's the boy off to, now, I wonder?" said Matthias's grandmother. "He comes and goes like the wind."

"Young 'uns," observed Timothy, "will be young 'uns. Allus was so, and allus will be so. That's what one comes to see when one gets to my age. Might as well try to control the winds and the waves as make young 'uns like owd 'uns."

"I suppose you're right, Timothy," said the grandmother. "It's only natural,

after all. And Matthias is a good boy, too."

Matthias was out in the stackyard, still running. He held the cavalryman's sword tightly in one hand. Presently he came to the gate which stood between the stackyard and the Home Garth. There was a sneck and a hasp to that gate, but Matthias was in too much of a hurry to remember it. He climbed the five bars at a rush, dropped on the other side, and fled up the Garth into the twilight.

It was late September, and already the white mists hung thick over the trees and hedges. In the west there was still a tinge of rosy red, lying low down on the horizon. Above it the sky grew darker and darker until its tint changed to a greenish-blue, against which the square tower of the village church was sharply outlined. Over the tower shone a star, very bright and clear, coruscating and gleaming. There was frost in the air—that was certain. A frosty night and a

moonlight—that was what was coming. On the grass there was a heavy dew—it penetrated Matthias's stout boots as he ran on. Boylike, he took no notice of it.

Matthias had a great task before him. Having eaten his supper at six o'clock, he gave an hour to the preparation of his lessons. He would rather have been out at play, but the lessons had to be done, and the best thing was to begin and finish them. At seven o'clock he put his slate aside, and took down the "Pilgrim's Progress" from the bookshelf in his grandmother's parlour. There was a fire and a lanthorn burning in the potato-boiling-house, and he went there and sat on Timothy's stool, reading. And, at last, he could contain himself no longer. Trembling all over, he rushed into the house for his sword. He was no longer Matthias. He was Great-Heart, and he was going to fight the giants.

Matthias's giants were thistles. Right





away at the head of the Home Garth they grew—great, shameless, hardy thistles, with strong fibres and bristling heads. They began to annoy the soul of Timothy about the beginning of the dog-days, and they continued to vex him and to cause him much searching of heart until winter came to destroy their fresh unruly strength and vigour. Now and then he sent forth a spare man with a scythe, and gave him orders to slay every thistle without mercy. Even then the thistles conquered. To begin with, they were legion, and what they had in number they further increased by strength and tenacity. Their fibres were as steel; their vitality that of unconquerable and unashamed youth. “They thistles,” said Timothy, “do spring up appeeriently out o’ nowt. I cuts off their heads, and up they comes once more, sure-ly. I cuts off their tails, which is to say, their feet, and lo! they grows fresh ’uns!”

To Matthias, flying across the Home

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Garth in the gathering dusk of the mystic September evening, the thistles were not thistles, but giants, wizards, enchanters, meet for destruction. Matthias, in fine, was full of imagination. He had heard his grandmother pray in the chimney corner, and from her prayers had learnt vast, mighty, sublime things. He had knelt by her side, wide-eyed, all his young soul filled with awe, and had listened to her vivid language much as folks once harkened to the seers and the sibyls. He saw the powers of light contending with the powers of darkness; Michael and the angels fought with Satan and all his hosts, and the thunders of heaven filled the air. The great clouds and misty hemispheres rolled and massed themselves one upon the other, lightnings flashed and rains poured, the earth yawned, and the dead, fleeing from the dismal shades, walked once more amongst the sons of men. At such times as these Matthias clasped his hands about his eyes and brow and prayed

for mercy ; nor did he feel sure that the world was not there and then to be destroyed until his grandmother forsook the sublime and awful, and turned to the pleading and the tender.

Matthias was wound up to slay the giants. He strode on, grim, determined, armed with the sword of the spirit and the sword of the flesh. He trampled on the buttercups and daisies, grasping his sword and holding his breath very hard. The cows, turned out to grass after milking, stared at him out of their great liquid eyes, and wondered what he was about. They knew Matthias for a sober, steady boy, who occasionally so far forgot himself as to pull their tails. That they forgave him, for they were willing to make allowances for human nature. When they saw him carrying his sword they had no fear for themselves. In Matthias's determined aspect there were high and holy possibilities far above the slaying of mere animals.

The twilight suddenly changed into dusk and darkness. The hedgerows disappeared, the trees were wavy blots against the grey sky. A wailing wind sprang up, and moaned across the wide meadows. Matthias trembled, but not with fear. The glamour of the night was upon him and filled his soul. He marched forward, his hand holding his weapon with increased tenacity. And suddenly the moon shot up, and its light flooded the landscape, and there stood the giants, rank upon rank, nodding their heads in ignorant derision.

For a moment Matthias looked at them. He was thoughtful. Through his mind rushed many ideas. He was many heroes rolled into one—Great-Heart, Arthur, Roland, Richard—all these he was and more. And now his enemies were before him. What should prevent him? He moistened his palm, and took the sword firmly in his hand.

“The Lord,” said Matthias, “hath

delivered them unto me!" He swung the blade and rushed in upon the thistles. Like Hereward in the hall of Bourne, he began a slaughter grim and great. The giant-thistles fell in heaps, voiceless and helpless. With every sweep of the sword their heads flew into the moonlight. Right and left strode Matthias, always slashing and cutting. His blade was wet with the life-blood of his victims; it dripped as he raised it to the moonbeams. Now and then some vengeful giant tore his hands and legs. He took no heed. His mission was to slay, and slay, and slay.

Suddenly Matthias paused. The moon dropped behind a thick cloud. Darkness came over the wide meadow. Still holding the dripping sword, Matthias stood in the blackness with his enemies about his feet, dead and voiceless.







CHAPTER VII

The Coming of the Great King



ATTHIAS and his grandmother sat by the fireside in the parlour of the old farmhouse. It was Christmas Eve, and outside the house the wind wailed and fretted about the roofs and gables. All day long there had been signs of snow in the murky sky; Timothy said it would come at night,

and now Matthias fancied that the wind was bringing it. Twice he had risen to draw back the curtains and gaze out across the orchard, hoping to see the snowflakes whirling between the black and leafless apple-trees. From the window he came back each time to the fireside to sit and stare at the glowing yule-log which was now at white heat, and filled the parlour with warmth, while it sent a million glittering sparks up the wide chimney.

“To-night,” said the grandmother, suddenly, “to-night, Matthias, the Great King will come. He always comes every Christmas night, when the folks are asleep, and no one sees Him, but He comes all the same. Every year, ever since they killed Him in Jerusalem, He comes back. That is why all is so strange on a Christmas night. The wind, and the trees, and the grass, and all the animals know that He is coming.”

Matthias opened his eyes wider and stared. The events of Christmas were

always strange to him, but this time they increased in mystery. Every moment of the past few days seemed charged with intense feeling. The long aisles in the black and dripping woods, where he had wandered in search of white mistletoe berries, were full of voices, and the fields, into which he had gone for holly from the hedges, seemed to be alive with unseen things. All that happened during those mystic days was but in preparation for something that was coming. The world waited, and Matthias waited with it, and his soul was breathless with wonder.

“Granny,” said Matthias, “where does the King come from?”

“From the world of light, child, that is millions and millions of miles away. There He sits on a golden throne, with five and twenty other Kings, less than He, that worship Him day and night, and besides them there are angels, and archangels and martyrs, and all the great soldiers and captains, all clad in white garments and

carrying palms, and shining so that neither your eyes nor mine could bear to look upon them. The sky there, Matthias, is dark blue, like it is here on moonlit nights in June, when the nightingales sing in the Home Copse, and you hold your breath for very wonder and joy. And all over it there are stars that flash like diamonds, and there are golden thrones set beneath it, and there sit the King's mother and her handmaidens, spinning with golden and silver threads, and every thread is the life of a man or woman made perfect."

Matthias crept nearer to his grandmother, and kept his eyes on her wrinkled face. He could see everything that the old woman described, and his vivid imagination added to it.

"But the Great King," continued the grandmother presently, "does not come to earth like that. When the time comes for His coming He puts off His fine robes, and lays aside His jewelled crown, and

steps down from His throne, and while all the angels hide their faces and bow down before Him He vanishes from their sight, because He is coming back to earth. No one knows how He will come. It is always in the night, before the cocks begin to crow at the first streak of dawn. You see a star fall, perhaps—that is the King coming, all alone, Matthias. He is always alone—there is nothing but Himself.”

“Granny,” said Matthias, whose head was by this time planted on the old woman’s knee, “how does He look when anybody sees Him?”

“Sometimes He looks one thing and sometimes another, child. When He first came He was a baby, just a little baby, lying in the manger of a stable. There were folks there that did not know Him, but the animals in the stable knew Him, and bowed down before Him. Sometimes He comes like a poor man, sad and weary and hungry, and dressed in poor clothes.”

“Why does He do that?” asked Matthias.

“Because He might come like the great King that He is, might He not, if He liked?”

“He comes like a poor man, child, because He is the King of the poor. When He was here on earth the rich and the mighty slew Him, as they would slay Him again, so now He comes to the poor who love Him, and He looks like one of themselves.”

“Then can people tell Him when they see Him?” asked Matthias.

“No, child. Here He comes, and here He stays until some man or woman receives Him into the house and speaks kind words to Him, and then He blesses that house and goes away, and they that dwell in that house are blessed for evermore. Amen!” said the grandmother, with fervour.

“Granny,” said Matthias, “has He ever been here?”

But the old woman did not answer. She had leaned back in her great hooded chair and closed her eyes, and Matthias

knew that she was praying. He crept away into the kitchen and found Timothy, who was smoking his pipe over a tankard of Christmas ale, and they talked of rare things, ghosts, wizards, and fairies, until the old clock struck nine deep strokes.

Matthias woke suddenly in the night. In his sleeping chamber all was dark, but presently the light of stars shone in through the little window. He began to collect his senses. Yes, of course, it was Christmas morning. That was why everything was so quiet, why such a great hush lay over all the sleeping land. The King was coming.

Matthias got out of bed. His bare feet pattered across the floor to the window. There was no blind drawn across the panes and he stood there, one hand on each side the casement, and looked out into the night. The dark sky was bright with stars, and far away over the village, above the long black line of wood and forest, there lay a narrow belt of light that told of the coming dawn. Suddenly Matthias

started and stared. From the very arch of the great blue dome above him a star shot out and fell to earth. And at the same moment there was a gleam of light in the church tower across the meadows, and the bells began to ring joyfully. Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong! And beneath the clamour of the bells came the sound of the waits singing the first lines of the Christmas hymn.

Matthias drew a deep breath, and fell on his knees before the window. The Great King had come. He was somewhere out there in the cold night, and the folks who sang in His honour knew nothing of Him. When Matthias went down into the great kitchen it was seven o'clock, and still dark. His grandmother was putting the finishing-touches to the Christmas breakfast which she and Matthias were to eat together, and there was nobody else about the place. Matthias was proud and happy. His grandmother had often promised to give him a silver watch, and

he had found it carefully wrapped up in his stocking. He now wore it in his waistcoat, and pulled it out every other minute in order to see if it kept time with the kitchen clock.

As Matthias and his grandmother were about to sit down before the great fire there came a timid knock at the door. The boy went to open it, carrying a lighted candle in his hand. The light, when the door was opened, fell on the figure of a man, clad in poor garments, whose face bore unmistakable signs of want and suffering. Matthias held up the light and looked at him, and his heart gave a great bound, for there was the Great King.

“Master,” said the man at the door, “it is Christmas morning, and I am cold and hungry.”

Matthias, keeping his eye on the man’s thin face, retreated backwards to his grandmother.

“Granny,” he whispered, “is it the King?”

The old woman looked up and saw the man. She looked also at Matthias, and saw the wonder in his wide-opened eyes. She beckoned to the man at the door.

“Come in, friend,” said she.

The man came in. He was cold, and shivered as he drew near the fire. Obviously he had walked through the night, and was well-nigh starved.

“Sit down,” said Matthias’s grandmother. She gave him a chair close to the fire, and a plate filled with hot food. The man began to eat. Now and then he tried to thank his benefactress; whenever he began the old woman heaped his plate again. As for Matthias, he stood in the chimney corner, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, staring at the stranger.

At last the man was warmed and fed, and the grandmother put money into his hand, and he went to the door, holding his head higher than when he entered. And at the door he turned and looked round.

“May the blessing of the Great God

The Coming of the Great King 109

be on this house!" said he, and went away.

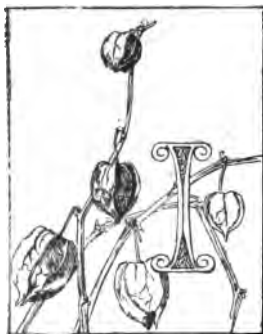
Matthias drew a long breath. He looked at his grandmother. Then he knew what had happened. The Great King had come to their house and blessed it, and all was well.





CHAPTER VIII

New Year's Eve



It was the last day of the old year, and the afternoon had been a bright one. Since Christmas there had come neither rain nor snow. All the land was green as in early autumn. The west winds were soft and warm, so warm that some of the birds in the orchard thought that spring had come again, and began to pipe and trill among the leafless branches

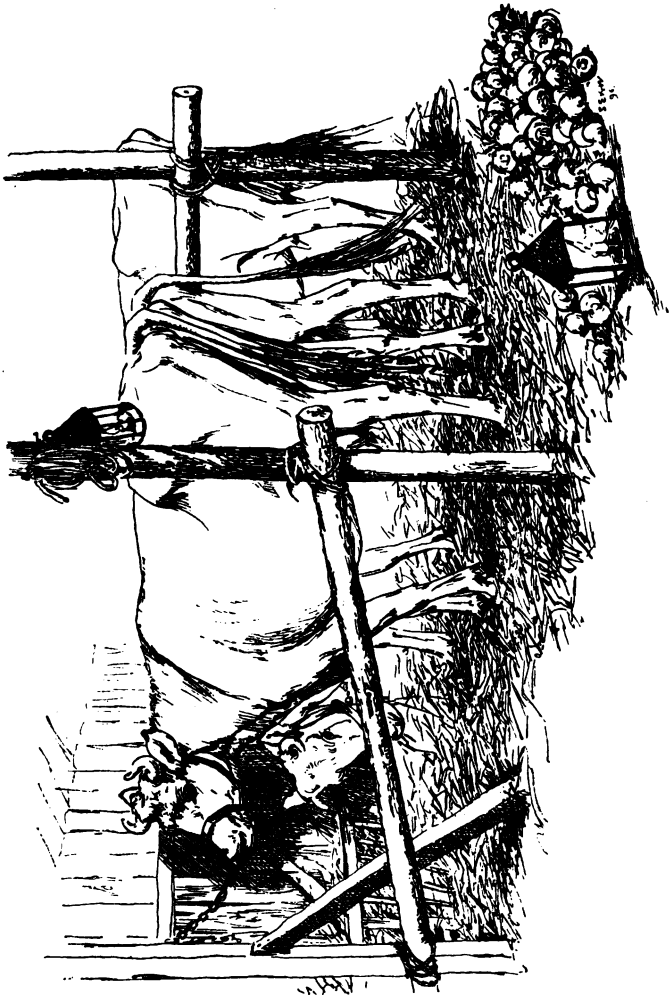
of the apple-trees. The sheep had a good time of it in the turnip-fields ; there was no snow and no ice, and so the soil was fairly dry, and the turnips remained unfrosted. The birds and beasts liked this mild weather, but the old men and women in the village shook their heads, and said that it boded no good to anybody. Sunshine in spring, heat in summer, rain and snow in autumn and winter—that, they said, was what was wanted to keep things as they ought to be.

Matthias and Timothy were in the cow-house. The afternoon light was fading away rapidly, and the farm-buildings assumed ghostly shapes in the dim twilight. The great gable of the barn loomed up like a spectre ; the kitchen chimney made a solid square of blackness against a belt of dun-coloured sky. In the cow-house, however, they noticed none of these things. There were two lanthorns hanging there—strong things of rusty iron, with thick glass sides, lighted by sputtering tallow candles,

which cast a feeble light and made the darkness in the corners still darker.

Timothy was foddering the cows for the night. There were six cows chained up in the mistal, two in each stall, and each was mooing in gentle impatience for its supper. Above their heads ran a long rack filled with sweet straw, just fetched by Timothy from the barn. For the straw, however, the cows had no immediate taste. Each turned its soft, liquid eyes to the corner where the turnip-chopper stood. There was a scuttleful of turnips for each cow, and each cow knew it.

The turnips were piled up in the turnip-hole, and Matthias stood at the entrance, armed with a two-pronged fork, while Timothy stood at the wheel and whirled it round. At every revolution the turnips, picked up by Matthias's fork and dropped in the chopper, were cut into regular pieces. They smelled sweet and appetising, and the cow that stood nearest to the chopper felt thankful that her turn came first.



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Timothy stopped turning his wheel.

"There's one full," said he, and picked up the basket. "Come over, Daisy."

The cow moved aside, and Timothy shot out the turnips into the trough before her. She mooed with delight, and the other cows groaned in expectation. "It's New Year's Eve to-night," said Matthias, leaning on his fork, and staring at Timothy as he came back to the chopper.

"Ay—so 'tis," answered Timothy.

"Does anything happen on New Year's Eve?" asked Matthias.

"Yes—a deal o' things," answered Timothy.

Matthias stuck his fork into a turnip, lifted it into the chopper, and said, "Why?"

"'Cause they do," said Timothy, and began to grind away at his wheel.

Matthias pondered, saying nothing. Besides, he knew that Timothy was going to talk.

"Rare things happen to-night," said Timothy, coming to a full stop with his

wheel, and leaning over the top of the chopper to take breath. "On this night all the stars dance."

"Do they?" said Matthias, opening his eyes to their full extent. "When—what time, Timothy?"

"You'll be asleep," answered Timothy.

"I'll lie awake and look through the window," said Matthias.

"Then they won't dance," said Timothy. "Never do, if anybody watches 'em."

He fell to the wheel again. Matthias stuck his fork into another turnip.

"Did you ever see them?" he asked.

"No," answered Timothy, "only heard tell of 'em."

"I should like to see them dance," remarked Matthias. "It would look like fireflies."

Timothy satisfied the second cow's cravings.

"It's to-night that all the trees fall down and worship the oak-tree," said he, coming back to the chopper.

"What do they do that for?" asked Matthias.

"'Cause the oak is the king of 'em all," said Timothy. "That's why. At twelve o'clock it is that it happens. Down they all tumble as soon as the clock strikes."

"Did you ever see that?" Matthias inquired.

"No, only heard tell. Nobody never sees these things," said Timothy, talking to the accompaniment of the whirring chopper, "but they're there for all that."

"I don't know why we don't see them," remarked Matthias.

"I knew a man that went out to see them once," said Timothy. "Simon, they called him—a' lived at Womersley village."

"And did he see anything?"

"Well, he did and he didn't. Least-ways, he set out to see the stars dance and the trees fall down to worship the oak, and as 'twas only ten o'clock when he left home, he turned into the hall kitchen for a talk with one of the maids, because he was

courting her at the time, and he stopped there a bit and had a pint or two of Christmas ale. And then he went out and sat under an oak-tree, and something picked him up and carried him through the air six miles, and so he found himself lying on the steps of the Butter-cross in Pontefract market-place when day came," said Timothy, carrying another basket of turnips to the third cow.

"That was queer," said Matthias.

"He thought so," answered Timothy, "and he took good care never to go out that way again. There are things that folks have no call to see in this world."

Matthias sighed.

"I wish I could see them," said he. "I've never seen a ghost nor a fairy yet, though you've told me lots about them, Timothy."

"Ay," said Timothy. "I've heard a deal about 'em myself in my time, but I've never seen 'em. But of course they're there for all that. You see, you have to

look a long time for them things, and then you don't always find 'em. Now, Bartholomew Peppercorn, he said he would catch a fairy and put it in a bottle, and he thought he could make a year's rent by showing it at a penny a head, and he said New Year's Eve was the time to do it."

"And did he?"

"Well, he tried. He went to the churchyard at twelve o'clock and he sat in the porch waiting until one o'clock, 'cause he wasn't quite sure whether it was twelve or one when the fairies come to dance in the empty church."

"And did he catch anything, Timothy?"

"Only a bad cold in his nose, which was red ever after," answered Timothy.

"That must have been to serve him out for spying on the fairies," said Matthias.

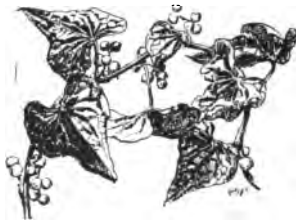
"Make no doubt on't," said Timothy. "They're queer things are them. There are some queer things out in the land."

Matthias nodded his head. He had no doubt on that point. The land was full of

mystic things to him, and as he glanced over his shoulder into the dark fold and out into the shadowy woods beyond, he felt that all the world was full of dreams.

“There!” said Timothy. “That’s the last, and now they’re all fed. And I’m going to have my drinking.”

Matthias followed Timothy across the fold into the house. Timothy washed his hands at the pump, smoothed down his grey locks over his forehead, entered the kitchen, and sat down to his ale and bread and cheese. He lifted the pewter to his mouth, and nodded. “A Happy New Year, Matthias,” said Timothy, “and many on ’em.”





CHAPTER IX

Like Corn in the Night



It was Matthias's twelfth birthday, and because of it his grandmother had given him a whole holiday. He had thought of it all the previous evening and had laid awake in his bed for an hour considering his plans for

the morrow. Because it was Spring, there were many things to do. The woods were full of flowers and the birds were busy in every coppice. Matthias decided to rise early and have a long day's bird's-nesting. So far that Spring he had only gone after the birds now and then; a whole day's holiday would give him the chance of carrying his expeditions farther afield. Accordingly, Matthias arose with the sun. Before seven o'clock he had eaten his breakfast and fastened on his stoutest boots. There was need of stout leather and thick soles, for the grass was heavy with the morning dew. In his coat-pocket Matthias placed a thick slice of bread and two apples, for he knew what it was to be hungry out in the woods. Then he pulled on his cap, took a stout cudgel that Timothy had cut for him from the thicket, and went whistling down the lane.

The morning was fair and gracious. Overhead the sky was clear and blue; across the land Spring walked laughing.

The first fresh tint of green was on every hedgerow and tree; at the foot of the hawthorns the violets hid themselves amongst their own fresh budded leaves. Here and there the may blossom was beginning to burst into flower. There were cowslips in the fields, and in the woods and coppices the primrose and the white anemone flowered and hid themselves beneath the undergrowth. Everything was fresh and sweet and fair: it seemed to Matthias that the world was having its birthday *fête* as well as himself. Therefore he danced and laughed as he went along the lane.

The birds were glad to see Matthias. No one in the parish knew so much about them and their nests, but his knowledge was never used for purposes of robbery. Already he had at home a collection of eggs, made by himself and Timothy. Out of a nest they never took more than one egg, and, having secured sufficient specimens for their purpose, they relin-

quished birds'-nesting save as an amusement. Matthias peeped into many a nest as he went his way to the woods, but he took no eggs, for he had the counterpart of all at home in an old chest, carefully packed in sheep's wool. His progress amongst the birds that morning, then, was that of a king going abroad to ask his subjects how they did.

"Many happy returns to you, Matthias the King!" piped the blackbird from the holly-tree. "We have five eggs in our nest, and the mistress is sitting on them at this moment, and I am practising my notes so that I can sing to the fledglings until they are strong enough to fly away. But what grand weather your Majesty is having! Look at the sun, how fine he is, and see the land, how it smiles because he shines on it! Truly everything is good."

Thus spoke the blackbird, and Matthias nodded to him and went onward, saluting all his feathered subjects as he passed. All through the early morning and until the sun rose high in the great blue arch of

heaven he roamed through the fields and lanes and woods. He ate his bread and apples by the side of a rippling stream that ran down the hillside into the valley. He gathered a great bunch of primroses for his grandmother and stuck cowslips in his button-holes, and round his hat he twined a wreath of daisies, and save when he was eating he never ceased to sing or whistle, for his heart was as light as one of the fleecy clouds above him.

When the sun was dropping towards the west Matthias turned homeward. He carried the flowers tied in a great bunch at the end of the cudgel in one hand, and in the other a curious stick that he had found in the woods. The stick was for Timothy. That night he would fashion it into a walking-stick with his clasp-knife, and he would take it to market with him next time he went there. It gave Matthias pleasure to carry these things home; to go empty-handed from the woods seemed wrong.

Matthias went homewards by way of

the churchyard. It was in his way, and besides that he liked to walk through it and look at the quiet graves and the quaint headstones. He climbed to the top rung of the wooden stile that gave access to the churchyard from the Duke's Garth, and stood there a moment looking at the familiar scene. And suddenly he bethought himself that he would go and look at the grave in which his father and mother lay asleep.

Matthias had never known either father or mother. They were dead and buried before he remembered anything. The grandmother had been father and mother to him, and Timothy had made himself brother and sister and aunt and uncle in one. But Matthias liked to go up to the green mound in which his father and mother slept and stand there awhile and think about them.

As he drew near the grave Matthias saw that on an ancient tombstone close by there sat an old man, dressed in a black cloak of strange shape. He rested his hands





on a stout stick and looked meditatively at the green expanse at his feet. When he heard Matthias coming near he lifted his head. "Well," said he, "and what are you doing here, my boy?"

Matthias replied that he was coming to look at the grave of his father and mother, and pointed to the headstone. The stranger put on a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles and read the inscription.

He turned to Matthias.

"And how old are you, child?" he asked.

"To-day," answered Matthias, "I am twelve years old."

"Then you never knew your parents," said the old man, "for they have been dead nearly eleven years."

Matthias nodded. A thought had just struck him. He took some of the flowers from his bunch and strewed them upon the grave. The old man watched him.

"You love flowers," said he. "And you do right to strew them there. Where did you get those?" Matthias told him, and

little by little gave him a full account of his day in the woods and fields. Then the old man asked him questions and they talked of many things, of the grandmother, and Timothy, and of the cavalryman's sword, and of Peter, who lay buried close by and of the coming of the King, and of many matters, and at last the stranger knew everything that Matthias knew.

"It is well," said he, "that you love all these things, Matthias. Never forget them. These are the things that are real. The world and its pomps and vanities are not real. They are shadows, and they will flee away in the end. But the skies and the flowers, the winds and the stars—they are of God and they carry God's message. That is life—to love all that God has made. Love every flower, and every tree, and the birds and beasts; hurt nothing, and respect everything, for love is God."

Then he rose and put his hand on the boy's head.

"This is your twelfth birthday," said he.

“Soon you will be a man. Grow, child, like corn in the night. Keep a pure heart and be strong.”

Then he went away.

Matthias ran home. He found Timothy in the fold.

“Timothy,” said Matthias, “how does corn grow in the night?”

Timothy scratched his head and looked at Matthias.

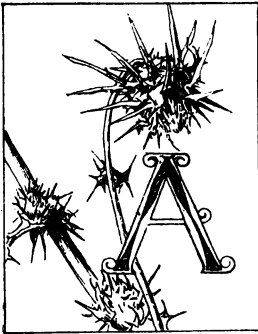
“It groweth,” he said at last, “in a secret and subtle manner. For the dew falls on it, and none are there to see it, and then comes the morning sun, and lo! the corn is green and full of virtue.”





CHAPTER X

The Abdication



At the Manor Farm everything was dark and full of heaviness. It was a summer day, and the land lay wrapped in sunlight, but inside the old house all was sorrow and silence, for the shadow of death rested in every nook and corner. Matthias stood by the hearth in the kitchen and looked round him at the gloom and knew that henceforth life must be different. And upstairs lay the old

grandmother, calm and peaceful in the sleep of death.

She had been dead three days then, and the world was changed. No more carelessness for Matthias; no more whole-hearted laughter; no more joyous unconcern as to the morrow or the next day: all that was over. Henceforth he must share the sorrows and the burdens of the world. Death had come to him, and now he knew the first secret of life. He had seen death before, when Peter the Irishman died, but then it had no such meaning for him as it now had. His grandmother had been his all in the way of human relationship; other ties of blood he had none. She was dead, and he was alone.

This was the day of her burial. Already friends and neighbours were coming up the lane from the village. The farmers and their wives, all labourers who had worked at the Manor Farm, folks who came from a distance to pay their last respects to the dead—all came and all were welcome.

Matthias met them at the door and welcomed them. For their comfort due preparation had been made. In the parlour there was meat and drink, and in the kitchen there was meat and drink. The farmers were shown into the parlour, the labourers into the kitchen, and all were pressed to partake of the hospitality which country-folk show at these times. And from parlour to kitchen went Matthias, grave and sad, playing the host for the first time in his life.

The farmers' wives watched and pitied him.

"Poor boy," said one. "He feels it, which is human nature, she being the only relative that he had. And so young!"

"How old might a' be?" asked another who came from a distance.

"Fifteen years of age a' is, ma'am, and a good boy. But how will he carry on this place?"

"Ah?" There were numerous inter-





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jections of a questioning nature. "How indeed?"

"Mestur Sharpe can tell us that," said an old man, nodding his head towards Sharpe the Lawyer, who sat at the parlour table.

"Matthias is sole owner," said Mr. Sharpe. "All the land is his own, and I am his trustee and executor. We shall pull through, friends, with your help and advice, until the lad can farm for himself."

"Aught that we can do for him!" began all the farmers in chorus, but then Matthias came back from the kitchen. They nodded their heads at him consolingly, and the lad, wondering what they meant, believed that they felt well-disposed towards him, and was thankful to them.

The village carpenter, who had charge of all arrangements, came and whispered to Matthias that it was eleven o'clock. The lad went up the stairs and opened the door of the room in which his grandmother

lay dead and shut it behind him, and no one followed. They knew that he was going to say good-bye to her.

Matthias went up to the bed and folded his arms and looked down at the still figure lying in the coffin. The face was quiet, statuesque, and calm. Was that death? She seemed asleep—he had seen her sleep like that many a time. Perhaps she was asleep now. She would open her eyes, and see him, and wake, and smile as she had smiled at him when he had come running into the kitchen and wakened her from an afternoon nap in her easy-chair. But yet—he put out his hand timidly and laid it on her forehead. Ah, God! it was not sleep, but death! For death is cold, and the calm face was colder than ice, and its coldness went to Matthias's heart and stayed there. She was dead—the sleep was that which has no waking in this world. Her eyes would never more open upon him; the old, wrinkled, weather-beaten face would never again smile on

the young face that watched it—she was dead.

Then the lad's heart burst, as hearts will, and he fell on his knees and stretched out his arms and sobbed his soul out. All his life lived itself before him as he knelt there—the old house with its quaint corners and fire-lighted walls, and himself a child at the old woman's knee with her hand upon his head and her eyes beaming with love for him—the coming home from school in the Autumn twilight with the lamp burning in the window and her face at the door to welcome him—O God, she would never welcome him again like that! Why did God take what he loved best? And why, oh why, did all things die in the end? The world was fair, and life was beautiful—until the shadow of death came over both.

He dropped his head on his arms and remembered her last words: "Be a good man, Matthias!"

That was all she had said. Not how to

be good, not to follow this or that shibboleth, not to trust in this or that creed, not to pin faith to this or that system—only to be good. It was what she had said to him many a time, and she could say nothing more important in the end. And now the lad lifted his head and looked at the quiet face, and he swore to her memory to keep his heart clean and to be good. And then he rose and looked at her long and steadily, and at last he bent down and pressed his lips to the cold brow, and then he held up his head and marched out of the room, composed and brave.

But from that moment Matthias was no longer a child. His Kingship of the birds and beasts and of the woods and fields was over. None the less did he love them, none the less did he go to them for the lessons that only they could teach him, but no more did he roam the meadows or cross the woodland paths a free and light-hearted child. He laid aside the crown of his childhood, and took up the harness of

the man. His abdication was complete, for now he knew the great secret. Death had come to him and read him the great lesson of life, and henceforth Matthias lived as all true men live, not to rule imaginary kingdoms, but to serve God and man in the real world that lies about us.







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